

Q. I'm having an argument about this subject with my wife. She insists that I'm wrong when I say things like "We've lived here six years" or "He drove down the road six miles" or "He threw the ball out the window." Am I right or is she?

A. You may eventually win that argument, but currently, your wife is still correct. The subject is "prepositions," and they are disappearing. Prepositions, as some readers may not know, are the small English words (like *at*, *to*, *for*, *in*, and *with*) that are placed before other words to indicate relationship. The word *for* is noticeably missing in your first two illustrations.

Traditional propriety would require revising the first sentence to read, "We've lived here for six years." The second illustration also would require adding the preposition *for*, and the correct statement would then read, "He drove down the road for six miles."

But suppose you changed the word order of that second statement to read: "He drove six miles down the road." Then almost nobody would challenge its correctness. And few would insist that *for* is really necessary in front of "six miles," although it is also correct to add *for*. On the other hand, nobody would argue that the second sentence would be correct if the word order were changed and the word *for* were omitted: "We've lived six years here." That sounds like a comment of a non-English speaker who hasn't yet mastered English syntax.

Why the difference? The answer, of course, is "idiom." When native speakers of any language adopt usage that is not acceptable under rules of grammar, that usage nevertheless becomes correct when a large number of native English speakers agree that it is. Consider the following statement: "I never go to that restaurant. Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded." That sentence would be complete nonsense if it were not for idiom.

The current tendency to drop prepositions seems to have resulted from a reluctance to put them at the end of sentences. English teachers used to warn their students (and some still may) that it is ungrammatical to end sentences with prepositions. (This mis-

understanding had no basis in truth; its origin is worth a column in itself.) But, recalling their teachers' warning to avoid "prepositional endings," many writers cut them out altogether. The following sentences occurred in the speeches or writing of educated journalists. (The prepositions that were omitted are bracketed):

- The defense has considered [in] which newspaper the advertisement should appear.
- The Senate is the forum [in] which he should make his case.
- The mistake [for] which I take all responsibility was made by my office.
- The Interstate was closed [for] 80 minutes.
- We are reviewing the declaration that was agreed [upon] this morning.

The dropping of prepositions prompted the following verse by Morris Bishop. It appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine back in 1947, when educated people had begun to cut them out. He called the spoof "The Naughty Preposition":

I lately lost a preposition
It hid, I thought, beneath my chair;
And angrily I cried, "Perdition!
Up from out of in under there!"
Correctness is my vade mecum,
And straggling phrases I abhor,
And yet I wonder, "What should
he come
Out from out of in under for?"

On the other hand, some prepositions are not only useful but needed to make sense of the previous verb. Consider the following:

- to run *down/up* the hill
- to look *at/through* the mail
- to log *onto/into* the Internet
- to drive *on/up/down/off/along* the highway

Sometimes the small word *up* changes the meaning of the preceding verb. Thus, the verb *eat* in the phrase "eat your dinner" has a meaning different from the phrase "eat up your dinner," which adds the sense of "entirely" to your request. You can also tell someone to "use the milk," but add the word *up* and the meaning of the phrase changes. "Use up the milk" means "Drink it all."

A different kind of language loss (the loss of a required tense marker) is still listed as ungrammatical in modern books on grammar. But that loss is ubiquitous in the speech of highly placed officials and in elite journal articles. The following are quotations from both:

- We have and are forgiving debt and handing out foreign aid.
- I have always, and always will in the future, condemn aggression.
- The local foundry has in the past and continues to serve the community.
- Numerous teenage groups have operated locally in the past and are now.

Grammarians would correct these statements by adding tense indicators to the second verb:

- We have in the past forgiven debt and handed out foreign aid, and we are still doing it.
- I have always condemned aggression and always will.
- The local foundry has served the community and will continue to do so.
- Numerous teenage groups have operated locally and are still operating now.

So the reader who sent the question and his wife can be confident that their opinions have plenty of support. **TFL**

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